

## GUEST EDITORIAL

### FROM HATS AND WHITE GLOVES TO HATS OFF AT THE TABLE: THE ROLE OF RITUAL AND CEREMONY IN CHILD AND YOUTH WORK

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Those of us who date back several decades remember the formalities of the 50s: For a job interview or any formal or professional occasion - hats and white gloves were the norm. The sixties (and seventies, eighties and nineties) have come and gone and there have been transformational changes in the reverence with which we accord special occasions ranging from birthdays to rites of passage to graduations. These have not always been for the better. Clothing, for example, does not always represent the true personality of its wearer. Yet we are still taken aback, and perhaps properly so, if a youth comes casually - or even disrespectfully dressed - to a special event.

In our field we are working hard as we well should to ensure that children and youth are treated with warmth, acceptance, and flexibility; that individual needs override rigid procedures and stifling rules. As we do this, however, we need to be careful not to lose sight of the fact that ritual and ceremony, and the trappings that surround it, can play a very powerful role in helping children and youth develop into mature adults.

There are anecdotes, both positive and negative, to support this perspective. I remember a disastrous middle school graduation event in which spitball throwing young people hooted when the principal spoke. I was appalled. I remember also an open house at a state facility for disturbed and retarded children and youth. Everybody - staff and residents alike - worked for weeks to put on the best face for the potential visitors and their pride was unmistakable as they welcomed visitors to their spotless, decorated living units and classrooms. I was warmed.

What then can ritual and ceremony "do" for children and youth and how can it help us child and youth workers support their strivings towards maturity? First of all they focus energy. The goal of preparing for and participating in a particular ritual or ceremony encourages people not only to work together, but to let daily quarrels and quibbles die in order to work towards a larger purpose that unites everyone. Secondly, they give the children and youth something concrete to work towards. Often, the fact that so many seem to "buy in" towards attaining it brings those who otherwise might resist things as a matter of course, along in spite of themselves. Here they may discover new talents and the joy of being part of something larger than themselves. Positive, participatory

cooperation becomes a respected behavior, with obvious benefits and gratifications. Thirdly, and perhaps that attribute of ritual and ceremony that is least recognized, is that they introduce structure into the life space. Time and space become differentiated as times are established for things to take place and spaces are allocated to house the activities. Punctuation of time and space encourages constructive anticipation and planful, organized activity. What better way of encouraging positive discipline can there be? There's no need for point and level systems or raised voices.

Preparing for a birthday, a graduation, completion of a sports season, an open house, the end of a special course of study -- even for Sunday dinner - can be opportunities for us to help children and youth bring out and showcase the best that's in them. For that, it won't hurt if they need to take their hats off at the table.